Death in the Modern Greek Culture

Panagiotis Pentaris

Abstract

Each culture recognizes and identifies death, dying and bereavement in unique ways. Commonly, a culture may be seen through the lens of death rituals; how those are shaped, interpreted and used by the society. This paper aims to look at the Modern Greek culture and depict its 'visualization' of death, as well as capture the rituals that mostly identify this specific culture. The Greek culture in overall is strongly influenced by the Greek Orthodox Church. Hence, the experiences of death, dying and bereavement are thread through religious beliefs and customs, alongside cultural norms.

The Greeks have believed, since ancient times, that at the moment of death, the spirit of the deceased leaves the body and passes to an afterlife, the "World to Come" after life on earth. The body is then prepared for burial or cremation according to the customs and traditions of the subculture (Wilson, 2006; Ikonomidis, 1965-1966).

Multifold interpretations of death may be understood in a single culture, due to various subcultures that compose the first one (Gerstein et al., 2009). To that extent, several different ideas and/or attitudes may be examined in the Greek culture, even though common values and meanings arise as well. As O'rourke (2010) has observed in her descriptive study in a Greek cemetery, not all individuals would follow the same rituals either during a funeral or in the period after death.

Regardless the universal meaning of death, each culture perceives the experience of it and the grieving process, and reacts to those in a unique way. Culture is a set of values and beliefs, which guide the given population on how life events are perceived, conceptualized, and understood (Gerstein, Heppner, AEgisdottir, Alvin Leung, & Norsworthy, 2009). Full understanding of the Greek culture, as far as the experiences of death and grief go, premises a viewpoint of

Ancient Greeks and the Christian Orthodox Church which have had a major impact on the modern customs and traditions (Mystakidou, Tsilika, Parpa, Katsouda, & Vlahos, 2004-2005; Spiridakis, 1972).

DEATH IN PRE-MODERN GREECE

The belief in the afterlife and the ceremonial practices of burial have existed in Greece since the sixth century B.C. (Kazantakis & Kakridis, 1997). Homer described in the Odyssey the Underworld, a place deep underneath the earth, where Hades transferred the souls of the dead to the Afterlife (Homer, 8th century B.C.). In his Epics, Homer posited that early death, or non-birth at all, should be preferable to human beings, since life's reward is not significant enough (Odyssey, 11.489-91).

In ancient Greece, death was viewed as a reward for the deceased, a final accomplishment, while at the same time it was perceived as an evil event for the communal life and the family's life.

Beliefs were imposed on the Greek culture by Orthodoxy and the Greek Church (Tomkinson, 2003). The Christian Orthodox Church started having a great influence in the 17th century. Death was viewed as "collective faith" and the fear of it was not presented (Mystakidou et al, 2004-2005). The beliefs of the Church suggested that death is an attainment of the deceased to pass on to eternity and away from the sins on earth. Death marks the passing of the deceased's soul either to Heaven, or Hell (Tomkinson, 2003). The grief of the bereaved and the mourning period will sign that passing; making it either easier if the grief is intense enough, or more difficult.

Ancient Greece and the Christian Orthodox Church have had a meaningful impact on the Modern Greek culture and its traditions regarding death experiences and the process of grief nowadays. Furthermore, the current customs and traditions shape the attitudes and behaviors towards the life experiences.

According to the philosopher Socrates, death should be perceived calmly, and the dying person should feel "blessed," for the moment of his/her catharsis has come (Cohen, Curd, & Reeve, 2011; Spiridakis, 1972). However, this is a belief that has not passed, through time, to modern Greeks.

Death in this culture means "bad news." Furthermore, the meanings people make are driven by their fear of death, and not death itself. Greek Mythology and Epics support the existence of the Underworld, where the God Hades exists. In that world, the deceased's soul will have to be transferred via a boat, led by Charon, to the Afterlife. That state will give the soul two options; suffer due to the sins committed during the person's time on earth, or experience happiness for eternity (Kazantzakis & Kakridis, 1997; Redfield, 1992; Homer, 8th century B.C.).

DEATH IN THE GREEK CULTURE TODAY

Myths and cultural heritages, such as those discussed above, aggravate the fear of death and impose the ideas of suffering if one dies. Death becomes an equal term to "pain," "suffering," and "emotional and psycho-logical disaster" (Graves, 1970). Greeks tend to avoid discussions about death, unless they are focused on the death of someone that no one in the household knows. Speaking of death, especially one's own death in his/her household, may be an omen that the "evil" will soon "enter" the doors of that home. Fear of death, or *thanatophobia* ("Θανατοφοβία"), is dominant in the Greek

culture, whereas the willingness to overcome those feelings is not.

"Death itself is a living experience of people left behind." (Mystakidou et al., 2004-2005, p.29). Greeks support the content of this quote and often times equate death with grief. One is afraid of death because of the grieving process the ones left behind will have to go through. Zartaloudi (2010) integrated this statement in her intersectional studies on bereavement and grief. Suggestions are made that different traditions indicate different perceptions of death and, to that extent, different interpretations of it. Additionally, it is suggested that grief becomes a subject of multiple definitions, based on the reasons one is afraid of death.

Greek customs and traditions around death

Different cultures grieve, mourn and perceive death and dying in different and unique ways (Gerstein et al., 2009). Greek culture represents a variety of customs and traditions that originate from the Christian Orthodox Church, for the majority of the Greeks are born and raised as followers of Orthodoxy (Tomkinson, 2003). For example, memorial Masses follow specific religious patterns that all Greeks, regardless of their place of origin, are familiar with. Simultaneously, common traditions and customs do exist and highlight all areas of Greece, urban and rural.

It is believed that when someone dies in a household, the "evil spirit" has entered that house. For that reason, all the windows need to be open for the evil to be "washed out" with fresh air. The deceased's body has to be dressed up with new clothing which has not been washed, so as to be buried in grace, and all the mirrors in the house, as well as shiny surfaces, are covered with white towels or sheets, hence the the bereaved are not diverting their interest into anything else but the reality of the deceased (Danford, 1982; Spiridakis, 1972).

It is a Greek tradition that the wake will be held in the house of the deceased among relatives and friends. During the wake, candles are burning by the head of the body, which is placed in a coffin and usually on a table. The candlelight is a mean of saying "goodbye" to the person who has died, while the head of the deceased has to face the front door of the house, as he/she is ready to leave.

The wake lasts for twenty-four hours, and during those hours family and friends are wailing, mourning and expressing their feelings in an intense and demonstrative way. It is believed within the Greek culture that expressive ways of grieving show greater empathy to one's loss (O'rourke, 2007; Danford, 1982; Ikonomidis, 1965-1966). Announcements are made in the community, prior to the wake, for whoever wants to have a chance of a last "goodbye."

When the wake is finished, the body is transferred by walking from the house to the nearest Church. The coffin is commonly carried by friends, but not relatives, while a priest is leading the cortege, followed by the relatives and the rest of the friends who have attended the wake. As soon as the coffin leaves the house, a woman or two stay behind to clean for the after funeral Mass gathering. These women pour water out of a glass and then break the glass at the front porch, or the entrance of the house, to get rid of the "evil" that the death has brought to the family.

The coffin in the Modern Greek culture is most of the times left open, unless the body has deteriorated too much due to an accident or an illness. With an open casket placed in front of the chancel, the

first degree relatives seated on the left side of it, and everybody else sitting or standing and holding a burning candle each, the ceremony begins. By the end of the chants and the chaplain's compliments to the family and the deceased, the priest proceeds and kisses the deceased on the forehead. Kissing the dead symbolizes the farewell from this world (O'rourke, 2007; Tomkinson, 2003; Ikonomidis, 1965-1966). After the chaplain, the family members will do the same, and the rest of the guests will follow.

Afterwards, the first degree relatives of the person who passed stand (or sit if the grief is unbearable) by the exit of the Church and receive the sympathies of the guests as a sign of respect to their presence. It is believed by the relatives that this will contribute to a passable trail of the dead in the Afterlife (Spiridakis, 1972). When everyone has shown his condolences and sympathy, they head back to the deceased's house where the "*coffee of comfort*" ("καφές της παρηγοριάς") is offered to everyone. During this time relatives and friends share experiences and memories for their loved one who has recently died. This ritual lasts from an hour to three or four hours, depending on how close the attendees were with the deceased.

If a woman does not wear black after the death of someone in the family, at least for one year, disrespect is shown to the deceased.

Many different customs and traditions can describe the process of death in a household. However, not all traditions are followed by all the subcultures in the rural or urban areas of Greece (O'rourke, 2007; Mystakidou et al., 2004-2005; Danford, 1982). For example there is a small island called Herakleia, where attendees of the wake and/or the funeral will not go back to the deceased's house after the funeral ceremony. There is a small county called Mani in the south part of Greece, where the relatives will start walking towards the house of the person who died, shouting out loud his/her name as they approach the front entrance (Mystakidou et al., 2004-2005). This characterizes their sympathies for the other household members, and their best wishes to the deceased and his/her passage to Afterlife.

In the rural areas on the island of Crete, the most southern part of Greece, if the person who dies is a man, then the wife (if there is one) and the sisters (if any) cut their hair as a symbol of strength, and cover the dead body with it Danford, 1982). Generally though, regarding all the population of that specific island, the family will be in deep mourning, they wear black clothes, men grow beards for a long time, and the family does not celebrate Christmas, and does not dye Ester eggs for the next year.

There is another small village in Crete, Sfakia (also known as Chora Sfakiwn), where if a father loses a son, he will never shave again, while the mother will never wear other than black colored clothes. Another small village, Agioupoli, in the south of the island, holds a unique tradition when an engaged young man dies. According to that tradition, his fiancée has to cut her hair, offer it to her dead fiancé, and marry the next son in order (the brother of the deceased, if there is any). In Crete overall, if the deceased comes from a high social class, then the whole community grieves with the family,

and no celebrations take place for the next six months, at least.

Greek culture embraces, as has been partially mentioned already, black apparel. Traditionally, a widow has to wear black for a lot longer than an unengaged woman, whereas men wear a black "weeper" around their left arm for forty days. If a woman does not wear black after the death of someone in the family, at least for one year, disrespect is shown to the deceased. Additionally, after someone passes away, a candle is lighted up for forty days in that household to remind everyone of the absence and the loss that has been experienced.

Rituals for the after-death period take place on the 3rd day after the death, the 9th day, the 20th, 40th, 6 months, 9 months, 1 year, 3 years, and 5 years. Those rituals are commemorations, in which family and friends participate, and which are known as 'Mnemosyna'. Special prayers are offered during a 'Mnemosyno' for the parting of the deceased from the world of the living. Furthemore, at those remembrances, boiled wheat is offered to the attendees. The wheat represents the reciprocity and solidarity between the dead and the living. Since ancient times it is believed that this offering will remit the deceased's sins, and that it has the meaning of renaissance (Wilson, 2006; Spiridakis, 1972).

A great number of these traditions and customs originate from the ancient times (Wilson, 2006; Mystakidou et al., 2004-2005; Ikonomidis, 1965-1966). Moreover attitudes and perceptions are shaped by the spiritual ramifications of the Greek culture (Tomkinson, 2003). Even though Orthodoxy has been and still is the dominant religious orientation for Greeks, other religions may be followed by some. Other customs have been products of the modern times and may apply only to the urban areas of the country, as opposed to small villages in the county sides (Zartaloudi, 2010; O'rourke, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Death and grief can be viewed from various perspectives, including culture. The set of values, beliefs, and ethics held by peoples shape their perceptions of death and, to that extent, the human experience of death and the process of grief (Gerstein et al., 2009). It is fascinating how diverse cultures react differently to the same life event. It is also interesting to observe how faithful people become to their own cultural heritage when death occurs (Cohen et al., 2011; Redfield, 1992; Danford, 1982).

Greek culture is manly characterized and influenced by the Church and Mythology (Tomkinson, 2003; Graves, 1970). The first has been, since the early Christian centuries, a significant support of the people. Death for Greeks is always attached to Orthodoxy and forgiveness by God for the sins that have been committed by the deceased on earth. The experience of death may be both a family and a community event, depending on the contribution the person has offered to the public, and in general his/her status. If the person has not been renowned, then small and short funerals take place.

Learning about traditional customs and rituals among different cultures can provide unique expertise to practitioners such as social workers, psychologists, and health care professionals who work with such populations in the fields of death and dying. It is of paramount importance that these practitioners are aware of the cultural differences on death and grief, and how those have an impact on the ways people would like to be treated.

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A 2010 MSW graduate of Hawaii Pacific University and a Greek national, Panagiotis (Notis) Pentaris divides his time between professional practice and academic work in London, while working on a PhD Research Project.

"Female Mourners," in Greece. Pottery fragment from c. 535-525 BCE, Louvre.